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talk prepared for the Albion Workers

Since the turn of the year in Glasgow at least 35 people have died from asbestos-related industrial disease. The actual figure'll be much higher. Nobody knows how high; these deaths aren't recorded properly; in some cases the name of the disease isn't put down on the death certificate. The ones who I refer to were all members of Clydeside Action on Asbestos and they came to the office seeking support and counsel. Many of them were ignorant of the cause of their illness, many won't have been diagnosed properly by the medical profession. 0thers never get told the truth about their condition. And not a single one gets support from the authorities, not without a long and bitter struggle. The disease they have is industrial disease, caused through negligence and straight exploitation, brutally and cynically.

0ne of the dead was a schoolteacher, a woman who had mesothelioma, a cancer caused only by exposure to asbestos; another woman dying from mesothelioma was a ward sister. Yet another woman worked in the black squad on the corporation buses, one of the cleaners.

Most victims worked in the insulation industry, in the shipyards and power stations, or the building game. The death of these three women may be unusual. But then again it may not. We can't tell because of the cover-up that goes on, the misinformation and disinformation surrounding the facts and figures. Anybody who knows the evidence knows there's a cover-up. Those who deny it are arguing against the facts and figures; and usually you find they're on the payroll of the big multinationals or the big insurers, in one way or another, involved in the legal or medical profession, or else they're politicians, or they work for the government, the DSS, whatever. In other words those who deny the full horror of what's happening to thousands of ordinary working men and women are usually benefiting, financially or through careerism; they're benefiting from the exploitation of these victims, most of whom will die, sooner or later, of asbestos-related disease.

Those who work at Clydeside Action on Asbestos are volunteers, 99% are themselves victims. They receive almost no funding and almost no support from any official body. Trade union assistance is minimal and except in isolated instances it's restricted to donations from individual branches and branch members, the rank and file. But it's not surprising it's from the rank and file because that's where the victims come. Most of the funding comes from the victims

themselves. The Clydeside Action group supply support and counsel, fighting with, and on behalf of, the victims; trying to secure disability benefit and other entitlements from the DSS, helping them get compensation from the businesses responsible, trying to bring the full horror of what's happening to the attention of the general public.

It's hard to grasp how hard a struggle it is. Even getting the authorities to actually acknowledge the disease the people are suffering from. In some cases they're dead already and the fight to get it acknowledged carries on, it carries on courtesy of the widows and families. In fact most victims die of a disease the authorities say they haven't got.

It's true, they won't admit you've got it. As long as they deny this disease that's killing you they don't have to pay you your disability benefit from the DSS. And you wont get your mobility allowance and you wont get your Reduced Earnings Allowance. And you won't get compensation from the people responsible for your slow and agonising death.

And that's what it's all about: money, money and profit. If you've ever seen somebody die from asbestos-disease then you'll have some idea of the brutal inhumanity of what's happening.

Believe it or not these DSS claims put in for industrial disease by the victims are tried under Civil Law. That's the system. You work all your days for a firm that doesnt tell you that you're running the risk of catching a terminal illness. And they know what they're doing. They've known about the asbestos danger for 90 years. And what've they done? Nothing - except hide the truth. And that's the story of the shipyards, that's the story of the Clyde over the past 60 years. The glorious Clyde shipbuilders. They were subjecting their workforce to the dangers knowingly and cynically: the place was saturated with it: John Browns, Yarrows, Stephens, the lot, you name it: saturated.

The QE2 was riddled with it. It's first captain is now dead because of asbestos poisoning. So think of the guys that worked on the installation, and the joiners and painters and sparks and labourers who worked alongside them.

And the Red Road flats was riddled with it. People think it's an old man's disease. We've mentioned these three women. There's guys right now in their thirties who've got these diseases, right now. And it's being hushed up. You'll have seen the Evening Times about Glasgow's rate of cancer and heart disease; 36% times higher than anywhere else in the world! You think you're dreaming when you

read these figures. Yes but we've also got a death rate from asbestos at 8 times higher than the UK average, and that's a semi official statistic so the real figure'll be higher; who knows how high. Clydeside Action was started by the laggers, 7/162 branch of the boilermaker's union. More than 85% of these laggers are now dead. The legacy's all around; Clydebank and the Greenock areas too, any place where there was heavy industry; exworkers are now dying or getting about with these lung diseases as best they can.

And then they try for their rightful benefits from the DSS, their rightful compensation from the firms responsible for their imminent death. And they discover the truth about this country of ours. That they've got no chance. Not unless they're willing to go through a bureacratic jungle, a nightmare, worse than anything Kafka wrote about. 0bstruction after obstruction, trying to prove they've got the disease. That's first thing. Because the government uses Civil Law to try DSS claims it means the burden of proof is on you. It's you that has to prove everything. The firms that cause your death are innocent until proven guilty. So what that means is you're guilty till you prove them guilty. So the first thing is prove you've got the disease.

It doesn't matter if your own doctor says you've got it or a chest specialist from Harley Street says you've got it. It's <u>their</u> doctors have to say you've got it. And they fly in the face of all reason to deny it. And at the end of the day their word is Law.

Most of these victims, these people, they never ever receive their rightful claim. The only winners are big business, the asbestos industry, the government and the insurers - plus the doctors and lawyers who make a fortune in consultancy fees. It's brutal and it's criminal. But it's legal. And there's almost no help from the official Labour Movement; their record - I'm talking about the leadership, the full-timers and the politicians - it's a disgrace, their record is a disgrace.

These claims drag on for years. 0ne guy a month ago eventually managed to get his disability benefit. Dyou know how long it took him. 12 years. He can hardly walk, he's nearly blind, he cant put his own shoes on, he's hardly got the strength to shave. And even although the DSS authorities now admit he's got the disease they've turned round and told him that he's going to have to fight for his other entitlements, his Reduced earnings, his mobility allowance. It's horrible. But this isnt unusual, it's run of the mill, the normal state of affairs.

In Glasgow only 12% of all claims for industrial disease succeed; the rest all

fail, they dont even get to the starting stalls. And once you're dead the vast bulk of your claim dies with you - not in England but in Scotland, under Scots Law, the widows have to carry on the fight and if they win - which is unlikely - then they receive a pittance. These women arent allowed to mourn their men, by the way. That's another government rule, an informal one. If they wait around grieving then the Law is used against them, they call it the Time-Bar. As soon as her man's in the coffin the widow has to get down to business because if she hasnt lodged her claim within a certain time then they'll beat her before she starts.

You're getting a horror story here and I apologise if it's upsetting any of you. But for thousands of victims in Glasgow and the West Scotland it's reality. Once they've got the disease they can no longer work, they get paid off and they wind up medically unfit to work, stuck on the very minimum invalidity benefit for the rest of their life - guys in their thirties, forties, fifties, sixties - instant poverty; that's what they're faced with; an instant drop to below the poverty line. That's when the full brunt of the tragedy hits you, not just you but your entire family; you're no longer a wage-earner. Apart from the fact that you've got this crippling and maybe terminal illness you also have to cope with the economic nightmare, it's a total disaster. And then the bueaucratic nightmare begins.

I mentioned a woman school teacher earlier on and that's important. She died at the turn of the year. When you catch mesothelioma you've got 6 months to live as a prediction. She survived longer. Often you'll find women do survive cancers longer than men. Every single day of that last time she had was spent fighting to prove she qualified for disability benefit from the DSS.

That's how we treat terminally ill people in this country. A week before she died representatives from Clydeside Action on Asbestos, in company with the woman's husband, attended a Social Security Appeal Tribunal on her behalf. One week before she died. And she had been fighting this claim for fourteen months. It still isnt settled. Not even now.

Before the claim is allowed her ex-employers are going to have to admit that she was exposed to asbestos while working for them. It would be alright if she was a lagger, or a painter or somebody that worked in the yards. But being a school teacher means she wasnt involved in a recognised high-risk industry, what they call a prescribed occupation. There's only certain occupations qualify under the DSS rules and regulations. So the burden of proof is on her family now, helped by Clydeside Action, to prove she caught the disease working in her job.

It's obvious she caught it while working. Schools in Strathclyde Region were riddled with the stuff; that's how they've spent over £10 million in the past 15 years getting it removed. A school had to get closed down 4 months ago so they could come in and strip out the asbestos. So it's a fact. But the authorities arent going to admit it; it's up to the family to prove it, because the purden of proof is on them under the Law. And you'll be surprised at the range of workers this DSS ruling applies. Even garage workers who get exposed to asbestos every day through things like brake linings and clutch pads; if they catch asbestosis their employer will deny it and it's up to them to prove it, because they dont work in a 'prescribed' occupation.

Big business and the DSS always start fighting you the same way, they start by saying you havent got the disease, and they pay doctors and lawyers to agree with them. But years later, that's what the procxess takes, years later when you finally get them to admit you've got the disease they turn round and say you didnt catch it while you were working for them. And years later they finally admit that 'okay you caught the disease at your work and now you're dying, unlucky, but it's not that disease you're dying from it's some other disease altogether - you've got a heart condition, you smoke too much, are you a drinker? you're out of condition, you've got asthma, chronic bronchitis. They'll say anything at all to avoid paying what you're due prolong the process for as long as they can. And if finally they are forced to part with their cash you might just be dead and if so if you're Scottish the claim dies with you.

0kay, it's time to draw things in. Most unions are in the same boat as the schoolteacher's union, the EIS. The membership dont work in jobs that allow them to pass the DSS prescriptive test, so if you catch these industrial diseases you wont be allowed a claim without a major fight. You've got to find a way of trying to fight back and safeguard yourselves. Let's be honest, there isn't one union in the entire country that can be proud of its record on health and safety. The only sure way to fight is from the shopfloor, from the grassroots. It's not a fight for politicians and it's not a fight for full-time trades union officials. With respect to them if there's any of them in the room, you can join in and stupport the fight but don't lead it, there's not many politicians or full-time union officials that die from industrial disease, unless they've spent time working in ordinary jobs. And there's nothing that's happened in the past makes me apologise for what I'm saying.

There should be a concerted effort on solidarity. That's for starters and it should go without saying that the rank and file workers have to move together on this and start sharing information with different unions. At the moment it's mainly laggers and ex-shipyard workers that have the information. But it's all available. It's there to be shared. But even before that there's a lot can be done by individual members and individual branches.

You can start your own monitoring service. Find ways of keeping an eye on the men and women that have started hitting the panel. Find out what's wrong with them. Dont rely on the doctors. You can't trust what's written on panel lines. But there's definite symptoms to these horrible diseases and it's very possible people who work beside you have caught one in the past and nobody has known.

Who had to take early retirement? Who d'you remember that started feeling too short of breath and too tired and just didnt have the strength to keep up with the work; the guys that started finding they couldnt climb a ladder any longer?

Think about it. This includes people who've had cancer. 80% of asbestos cancers are lung cancers. People will have died of lung cancer and it's been caused by asbestos but nobody's told them.

Whose health started to go? What was up with them? Who suddenly had chest pains and went breathless and wasnt up to a job they might have been doing for 20 years? There's different things. And dont just look for the older folk, as I said earlier, this disease can hit people in their 30's.

This isnt scaremongering. C.A.A. get told they sensationalise things. You've got to remember that during the Gulf War the MP's discovered exposed asbestos in the House of Commons and they shut Parliament down immediately till it was stripped and removed. That's how serious the politicians take it when it happens to them. They done the same through in Edinburgh a few months ago in that place where the Convention was held; as soon as the 'notables' found there was asbestos there they shut it down and didnt go back till the workers had come in and removed it.

All Clydeside Action on Asbestos does is try and help the victims and tell the truth about what's happening, and then share the information and knowledge they've built up. And prevention's best of all. Make sure you're place of work is free of asbestos. Start keeping tabs on what's happened in the past, when renovation or reconstruction work was going on. It's only very recently that safeguards have been taken. Almost every workplace in the country has been riddled with asbestos at

some time or other. Most of them still are. Most employers know the truth but keep the workers in ignorance, like they've been doing for nearly 100 years now. You'll find asbestos anywhere, in tiles, radiators, roofs, doors; you'll find it in different materials - remember it's used in insulation in three ways, heat, frost and sound. It's you that's got to be responsible about it. You can't afford to trust anybody else. It's your life and it's your workmates' lives.

Keep your own data about these things, get the folk that've worked in the place for a few years to think back about when the asbestos was getting stripped. A hundred and one things. You can get the information you need down at the Clydeside Action office. A final word here is that Clydeside Action on Asbestos could also do with support, moral support and financial support. As I say it's run by volunteers, nobody gets paid, and 95% of them are victims themselves.

Thanks for listening.